

[I Wouldn't Exchange]

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TITLE: I WOULDN'T EXCHANGE

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Name of Person Interviewed Mrs. Bess Long Wilburn (White)

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Occupation Teacher

Name of Writer Caldwell Sims

Name of Reviser

Mrs. Wilburn wrote this article herself, at the request of the interviewer. She is considered by the rural Supervisor of Schools in Union County, as one of the best, if not the best Teacher in the County.

Mrs. Wilburn has the gift of expressing herself with a great deal of ease and fluency.

The interviewer explained the chief objective of a life history to the Lady. She stated that her money which she has earned in the Schoolroom has been invested in things that go to make a more attractive schoolroom and for the betterment of her home and community. C. 10 S. C. Box, 2. I WOULDN'T EXCHANGE.

Chapter 1 The Lady Enters.

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At the quiet hour just before dawn more than half century ago in the little village of Jonseville, South Carolina a group of people sat around a huge fireplace filled with brightly burning logs.

The only sound in the room was the singing of the tea kettle as it boiled there on the hearth and the occasional splutter of the fire as the logs burned and rolled together.

On the faces of the group was a look of expectancy and of waiting. A sound came from a figure lying on a big four poster bed in the corner of the shadow filled room.

The old negro mammy arose from her place by the fire and turned up the wick of the kerosene lamp.

One of the men, who was plainly the kindly country doctor, went to the bedside while the younger man cleared his throat nervously, threw another log on the fire and went into an adjoining room where three tousled headed little boys were fast asleep on a trundle bed.

In the dim light of the night lamp his eyes rested on the chubby faces of his three little sons and his lips moved in silent prayer for the beloved wife in the next room who was walking through the shadows that another life might be.

A tiny wail, hurried movements and the voice of the doctor saying, "Come, Gid, and see the girl who has broken up your team of boys".

As the father leaned down to kiss the dark haired mother she asked "Do you mind that she isn't a boy?"

The father looked at his wee daughter and with love filled voice replied, "I wouldn't exchange her for the world" and that is how I, Mary Susan Elizabeth Gwynn Long was born one January night to James Gideon Long and Susan Lourena Gwynn Long.

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Chapter 2 The Lady Moves.

Then I was only a few months old my father who had been elected Sheriff of Union County moved his family to the town of Union in 1885 - It was fitting that the people of his county honor him with the office as he had been tireless in his efforts to help his country in its hours of need.

His father, John D Long, a gifted and brilliant man had been active in the building of the then younger county.

He had led two of his young sons to the battle fields of Va. and fought side by side with them.

Later in the same Conflict he saw another young son Gideon, who was my father, go to war.

At that time Gideon was only fifteen years old but he marched away with Capt. D. A. Townsend and his company of "Sixteen Year old Boys".

After the War Between the States closed my father returned to the town of Jonesville and opened a mercantile business. Soon after he married Lou Gwynn, daughter of Jeptha and Susan Abell Gwynn of York.

Their young married life was spent during the troublesome days of Reconstruction.

When human endurance had reached its limit my father was one of the very first to join that mysterious band of men known as "The Clan" who went out to help make the South safe for its beloved women.

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I have sat often at my father's knee and listened to the "Tales of the Trying Times". The lips that told me those secrets have been sealed with the kiss of death and so they will be safely kept locked away in the sanctuary of my heart.

My mother, too, had a helping hand to lend. She with others good and brave women endured the hardships, encouraged their man and sat up nights making Robes for the "Riders by Night".

These two with their four children came to live in the Union County Jail. Here they encountered many trying times.

I remember the awful night when my mother awoke and heard horses hoofs beating the night air.

We heard them coming far off, then nearer, hundreds of them and then suddenly they had quite surrounded the jail. It was two O'clock in the morning, no one there to defend the prisoner but a lone man, his wife an expectant mother, and four little children.

In those days there were no telephones in Union, so quite alone he stopped out on the porch and faced that mob of five hundred angry and determined men. He had only his gun so he spoke out to them, "I know many of you and know you as my friends but the first one of you to set foot across those stone steps I'll shoot down".

Away out in the crowd a man called out, "Come on back boys, lets go. Gid will do just what he says. So they went away and my father had saved a man from being lynched.

Later when the negro was given a trial he was proven inocent of the crime but he left here and went out West as there still was a feeling of prejudice against him.

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Many years later when my father was involved in a trouble not of his making, neither a reflection on his honor he was sitting alone in his office. He had been unable to sleep and had gone there to read.

It was half past two in the morning so my father was very much surprised when someone tapped gently on the office door. He, thinking my mother had come for him said "Come in". The door opened slowly and a negro stepped in.

My father recognized the man he had saved from the angry mob and said, "I told you to never come back, why have you?" The negro told my father that he lived in Texas, had worked hard and saved over three hundred dollars and hearing thro' some of his kin back here of the trouble had come back to offer all he had in gratitude to the man who had saved his life.

My father explained that it was not a question of money but something that happened in the line of duty which he thought would come out all right.

He sent the negro with his gift back to Texas on early morning train. None ever knew of this incident except my mother until the day my beloved father lay dying.

A letter came and my mother opened it. It was from the man in Texas and he just wrote to wish him well as he had not been able to keep his mind off the great favor my father had done him.

I read that letter to my mother and the closing line said "May the best that can come to you, come".

I walked back and stood by my father's bedside. The setting sun sent its rays all around him and touched everything with its gold and as life ebbed away I thought maybe the best that can come to man is when he has lived worthily and can go out to meet the great Adventure unafraid.

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The morning after the mob had been dispersed my father was unable to find the jail keys. This was a serious state of affairs as they had to have food.

My mother thinking my father might be overpowered by the mob had hid them, but was unable to recall the place as she had been so excited.

Two days later she suddenly remembered where. She had torn open one of the mattresses on the company bed and put them in it. Those keys were well hidden for there were two huge feather beds on top of the mattresses.

I have tried to blot from my memory the hangings that took place. As nearly as she could my mother shielded us from any knowledge of them but we could see the hangman's rope being stretched out under the old wagon shed, the special meals of fried chicken and other good things my kind mother would have sent up to the condemned man.

The visits of the kin folks, the preacher coming and once my father had a pool built upstairs in the prison to baptize a man who was going to be hanged.

Many of my childhood memories are harrowing but I wouldn't exchange them.

Chapter 3. The Lady Learns

Another girl had come to our house to stay. My sister Sarah Louise Long./ Then there were five of us. My brothers, James Gideon Long Jr. Abel Gwynn Long and John Arthur Long were old enough to go to school.

In those days the public schools were unsatisfactory so my brothers were sent to a private school known as The Male Academy. There was also a good private school for girls, Clifford Female Seminary.

When I was old enough to attend school I went to it.

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In those days Main street in Union was knee deep in mud. As I lived more than a mile from school I had to ride. It seems I went in state as I had an old fashioned phaeton, a gentle horse and an old negro driver at my disposal.

It mattered not to me that my driver was a United States prisoner serving a long prison term. In those days there were no chain gangs and often prisoners were sentenced to the county jail to work.

“Clifford Seminary”. The name has a real charm for me. It was truly a place in which to live and love and learn. Yet a school in terms of laborious lessons, tiresome tasks and long hard hours. It was a real school home to be happy in, learning about beautiful and interesting things. Here I learned about art and music and books. Under the guidance of my beloved teachers, Dr. and Mrs. B. G. Clifford and Miss Susie Scofield many happy days of my childhood were spent, studying in the class rooms, painting in the studio, reading in the library, helping Miss Susie tend to the canary birds and squirrels or just playing under the Rose arbor and in the beautiful flower gardens.

And now nearly fifty years since I am told that the same method of learning I knew then - is new!

Only this past summer I had the pleasure of observing in the schools of the Parker District in Greenville, [S.?] C. where the learn by doing method is used, and as I watched the happy children living and loving and learning my eyes grew misty with my own Childhood memories that I wouldn't exchange.

Chapter 4. The Lady Loves.

Then before I knew it I was grown up! Graduation Day came. Flowers and friends and finery. Commencement at my school was a Gala affair.

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There were plans and parties and dresses to be fitted. One for the Baccalaureate sermon, one for the concert, one for the Reception and one for Graduation. That had to be the loveliest of all with lacey ruffles and satiny streamers.

It was almost like getting your trousseau ready and the dress makers in town were kept busy.

There were girl friends to be invited for Commencement week. Your favorite aunt for whom you were named came, boy cousins to keep your girl friends entertained and if you were fortunate enough to have a grand mother she came too. Such a good time everybody had flirting and frolicing.

The night of my Graduation came. There were three of us who had started to school together and grown up together. I thought we looked very lovely. Our dresses had wards and wards of misty white organdie, sewed all over with dainty laces and white satin ribbons.

I think Mamie's sash was wider than mine but my pompadour was higher than anybody else's.

It was the day of the pompadour and to be stylish one had to pile and pile your hair in a towering mass on topy top of your head.

I remember what my favorite uncle said to me when he came up to congratulate me. "Bess, if you have half as much on the inside of your head as you have on the outside you'll surely make your mark in the world". I almost wished it had been my favorite aunt who had come she wouldn't have said that.

After graduation there was a summer of fun. The only serious moment I remember was when we were requested by Mrs. Clifford to take the teachers examination being given that summer.

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The three of us received first grade certificates. I did not know that mine would be put to use so soon.

About this time my father suffered financial losses.

My sister younger than I needed to complete her education so I asked my parents to let me teach. In those days that was the only work a young lady could do outside her home.

I want to be perfectly honest about entering the teaching profession. I can not say that I was fired with the desire to help the young build character. Frankly, I didn't know what it was all about. I just wanted to help my beloved mother and father when they needed it.

The first school offered me was not far from the home of a school mate of mine. It was in an isolated district and I had to walk two and one half miles to school and alone as nearly all the patrons lived on the other side of the school

There were about ten or twelve almost grown girls and boys and about the same number of small children.

The school house was a very old log house with cracks in it a rabbit could squeeze through. Sometimes when the door was shut a child's little dog would come whining through. There were two windows with wooden shutters and at one end a big fireplace made of mud and stones. We did not bother to cut wood we just threw on a whole stick.

I didn't like that school. I had never seen a place like it and I was afraid of the big boys and girls. They know so much more than I. They could work the most marvelous sums all over the front and back of their slates. I never liked arithmetic anyway.

But I loved those little children and we had good times together when we could slip off to one side of the school yard away from the big boys and girls.

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There was something else I liked at Piney Grove. My walk to school went through a forest of magnificent pine trees. I would almost run to get to them. They stood so tall and still and as I walked on the thick brown carpet of fallen needles and looked up through the columns with the rays of the morning sun slanting through them, listened to the murmur of the wind in their branches I felt as if I were in a great cathedral and my heart would sing a morning hymn to the Giver of all good gifts. I believe I am a better woman for having known those trees.

When I would pass on out the woods with a song in my heart. I had a gun in my pocket which my father insisted I carry in case I met a mad dog. I was just about as afraid of the pistol as I would have been of the dog.

I stayed two sessions. The salary was small. Twenty five dollars a month. Board costs twelve and one half dollars a month. I don't know what I did for those children but I know what they did for me. There and then I resolved that if trying to be a good teacher and really being one could help people like those I had known there I would dedicate myself to the profession.

A friend who was teaching at Cross Keys gave up the position to move with her family to a distant state. Before leaving she had recommended me to the Trustees. The school was offered to me and I accepted. That was thirty - three years ago.

The road to Cross Keys was a long winding one and mud was up to the hub of the carriage wheels. The journey lasted from early morning until the setting of the sun.

Awaiting me here was love and life and I wouldn't exchange.

Chapter 5. The Lady Lives.

One January morning long ago I stood on the knoll in front of the Key House and looked down the long drive way with its great gnarled walnut trees flanking each side. The whole

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world was aglisten with the morning sun dancing and shining on the frost that had fallen in the night.

I walked down the Walnut Lane past a friendly country store, followed a zizzag rail fence that seemed to be uncertain as to where it should end. I came to a little white school house that opened its arms and took me in. It has held me ever since.

I recall the first day in my new school. Here the enviroment was better than in my former position. [?] was the salary which was thirty - five dollars a month with ten dollars a month board.

The [remuneration?] for my board was out of keeping with the laden table I sat down to. It was a large old fashioned double deck table. The part of the table that held the service was of course stationary while the part that held the food would spin around in a most convenient way for serving.

While the Cross Keys school was only a one room school it was the custom of those in charge to provide the school with cultured and capable teachers. Here I found ambitious children whose parents encouraged them to become fitted for High School in nearby towns. Nearly all the children in the school had older brothers and sisters away in college.

Most of the families owned their own homes and lived well and comfortably which made for a pleasant social atmosphere.

Many of the social activities centered around old Padgetts Creek Church that had been sheltering and tending the people for one hundred and fifty years.

Its quiet churchyard was the resting place of the forbears of these kindly people who met each Sunday to worship under the guidance of their old pastor who had led them for over forty years. After services there would be a period of visiting together there in the Church and on the grounds.

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Friends and kinfolks asking about each others health etc. Then you were invited to go home with some one for dinner. It was very nice and friendly.

On Sunday afternoons the beaus of the place would take the young ladies to drive. It was before the day of the automobile so every young man tried to have a stylish turnout consisting of a high narrow buggy and fast stepping horse.

My first Sunday afternoon in Cross Keys was claimed by the young son in the home where I was boarding. [As?] we drove over the pretty country roads and lanes the young man pointed out the Key House, his mother's old home and asked me how I would like to live there. It was lovely so I said, why anyone would like that lovely old place". He said, I'm glad to hear that because I expect you'll live there". It struck me that young men in the country lost no time but I accepted the remark as a joke but it turned out to be a prophesy, for thirty - three years later I'm still here in the old Key House made dear to me with its rich memories of other days and of my own memories.

Other activities in a social way my first winter in Cross Keys were Tuesday night Choir practice, Wednesday night prayer meeting and the gay parties the young folks had on Saturday night. Sometimes the party would be a square dance, sometimes a pound party or a candy pulling.

In summer we enjoyed picnics, strawrides or water melon slicing. All of it good wholesome fun.

The people of Cross Keys have always taken their politics seriously so much ado is made over their campaign meetings and barbecues.

My first winter in Cross Keys passed very pleasantly. I had been busy and happy in my school duties and had been asked to accept the school again.

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In the spring I was married to William Claude Wilburn, son of Barney and Mary Whitmire Wilburn.

The people whom I had come among and grown to love had in return loved me so they seemed glad that "Miss Bess" was really one of them and would stay on with them.

We lived with my husband's parents. He was the overseer of his father's plantation which worked a large force of negro hands. I stayed busy with my school duties then in the spring of 1907 I went home to await the coming of our son.

Wm. Claude Wilburn Jr was born on Easter Sunday morning.

We started housekeeping at the old Gregory place. I loved it there, the wind swept hill, the friendly old house with its big open fireplaces, the old apple trees sifting their snowy petals down on the tender green grass, old "Aunt" Lissa at the wash place under the cedars with her white clothes flapping on the line. Claude out in the freshly plowed fields and our little son playing under the big oak tree with his dog and white rabbits. The white pigeons flying around the [cote?] with wings glistening in the sun like streaks of silver. I was happy on the hill baking and brewing and making a home.

When my son was four or five years of age I went back to the school room and he with me. From this point I really date my teaching career. Heretofore teaching was merely a mechanical process but now it was quite different. I not only taught with heart and mind but I think I put some of my soul in it.

Each day was a new day to do something fine in, something different in, something to make a child happy.

That was a long time ago. The little boy who trotted along by my side is a man grown, doing a man's work but his mother still walks that road facing each day with high resolve to help some child find its place.

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Two other little sets of fingers have held on to mine down that road, the two little girls whose mothers God called home have shared my heart and home: I pray God that I have not been found wanting.

If I have some measure of success in my profession not all the credit is due me. I have tried to be the best teacher I could be, I've kept abreast of the times, I've read good books, I've traveled some, bought professional books and had professional training when I could get it. "The best gift is part of the giver". If that be true I have made my people here in Cross Keys a true gift because part of myself is truly given to my work.

In return they have given me love and confidence and without either I could not have gone on and on with high courage and brave heart They have made it easy for me.

Through the years I have shared with them, their joys and their sorrows. I have taught children of the children I taught. This year I am teaching the lovely little granddaughter of a former pupil, and when she slips her little arms around my neck to kiss me goodbye I think how good God has been. Three generations kissing me goodbye in the same school room. Yes, I have been a most fortunate woman.

Together we have had sorrowful days. When Sarah Ella Stevens tried to make her little death chilled fingers write her name as she lay gasping for breath. The day Ray Stevens who had gone so far (into that Happy Land) called back, "Miss Bess, I see Grandma. I'll tell her I made my grade". As the tired little heart stopped I looked down at the grief stricken father kneeling by his oldest son's death bed and thought of the mother lying so desperately ill back at home. I had been the father's teacher, the son's teacher so who else could have share their grief so fittingly? Sometimes I'm called upon to share their troubles too.

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There was the time I went to the Death house and saved poor under - priviledged Roy from electrocution. The kind and good man who was the Governor listened to my plan and spared his life. Today Roy walks among his friends a free man.

The path we trod together isn't always rough. It runs through pleasant places often. Sometimes its a young friend who is going to be married and needs helpful advice or a young man who is going out to seek his fortune, a little old lady who needs a steady hand to guide her faltering steps, a young mother who wants a glad welcome for the new baby or a little child that needs to be led. Or just a companion who needs a word of encouragement. Always I give of myself and so - A star has risen in my heart To light a path to God. It is of His being a part, To guide the way where saints have trod. It rays shine out and all about On footsteps weary and slow On happy feet of children sweet As Heavenly they onward go. Dear God may my star whine on, Showing me the way afar, Till at last I come with tasks well done To His gates standing ajar.

I have seen the Cross Keys school grow from a one teacher school to three. The salaries of the teachers increased from thirty - five to one hundred dollars. Our building had been added on to but was old an inadequate. I have never allowed the condition of the building or the small salaries to effect my teaching or interest. I tried harder to make the place more attractive and comfortable.

Last year the Trustees, the Supt. of Ed. and the Goverment planned a new building for the Cross Keys school. I watched the tearing down of the old school house with mixed emotions. It held many memories for me as a young girl young wife and mother, teacher and friend. With my people we had loved and learned and lived in it.

While the new building was under construction we went up on the wind swept hill where I first kept house and as I watched the children running in and out of my old home my thoughts went back to the days when my little son played there with his dogs and white rabbits. Sometimes I'd see a flash of silver streak across the sky and I would think it was

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the flash of one of the pigeons wings but the pigeons are long since gone and the streak of silver I saw was only the sunlight on the wings of an airplane high up over my old home.

We have moved into our new school house. It is a modern brick building, warm and comfortable, equipped with modern fixtures. In the basement there is a beautiful dining room where hot lunch is served each day. A school bus transports the pupils to and from school. I see happy children filling the halls and passing on into the beautiful school rooms where everything is done to make them happy and useful.

I see an efficient and helpful Supervisor coming in to bring us new ideas and to encourage us. I see happy children with their teachers go down to dinner, then on out to a modern play ground, and then I think, at last, I have reached my goal.

But have I? I think not. Tomorrow when I walk out the door of the old Key House, which is now my well loved home, stand on the knoll and look up the road through the old Walnut Lane, there I'll see many changes. Only three or four of the old trees are left. They had to give way for the fine new highway. The old chestnut rail fence just wandered off long ago, the country store has had its face lifted and is trimmed all over with electric [goo?] wires and is now a modern hussy with painted face.

The little white school house is gone and a beautiful new brick building stands with proud insolence just as if it had always been there, but I know better.

I remember the little white one that opened its arms to a young girl thirty - three years ago and took her to its heart so tomorrow I shall walk up the road open my arms to that new school house so young and inexperienced, take it to my heart and help make it the best place in the world in which to live and love and learn.

And I wouldn't exchange.